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Islamic Radicalism in North Africa Force Works, For Now

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Conclusions

- Islamists in the Arab states of North Africa are having little success in gaining political power. This is due to repressive security measures and popular despair over the violence on both sides, especially in Algeria and Egypt. Islamists in Algeria lost the presidential election held in November 1995, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt bowed to government tactics of arrests and a ban on political activity in elections held last fall.
- The governments of Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco have probably reached a plateau in their use of intimidation tactics against Islamist critics. They seem to lack the imagination or will to try new, less dire strategies for dealing with opponents. As long as coercion seems to work, they will have little incentive to reform.
- As the more violent Islamic radical movements lose momentum, the risk increases that they will carry their struggle abroad. Over the past year, Egyptian diplomats in Europe and South Asia have been the targets of terrorist attacks, and Algerian extremists have been responsible for terrorism in France.
- Except for Egypt, which receives nearly \$2 billion in U.S. aid each year, the United States has little economic investment and minimal military or diplomatic commitments in the region. Governmental use of repression poses a longer-term challenge to U.S. interests, however, as it opposes a key traditional pillar of U.S. foreign policy: the global promotion of democracy and human rights.

Background

Islamic radicalism in North Africa has three faces—a religious one which seeks through personal piety, prayer, and preaching to make society more "just"; a reformist one which calls for legitimate political action using democratic, electoral means to change state and society from within; and an extremist face, which believes that only violent confrontation and destruction of the state can establish a new Islamic world order. Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and Egypt tend to regard the latter two as equally dangerous to regional and regime stability. Their concerns about regional security, if radical Islamists were to gain power, grew in 1991 when an Islamist political party—the Islamic Salvation Front

(FIS)-scored a major election victory and appeared to be on the verge of gaining power in Algeria.

Over the subsequent four years, Algeria's neighbors watched in growing horror while the military-dominated Algerian government canceled elections, outlawed the FIS, and the country slipped into the chaos of urban terrorism and civil war. Determined not to repeat Algiers' mistake in allowing an Islamist party access to the political process, Tunis, Rabat, and Cairo sought to eliminate the opportunities for radical Islamist politicians to force a confrontation with the government, legally or illegally. Even Libya's Muammar Qadhafi, a long-time sponsor of Islamic "liberation" movements, was not immune from Islamist-inspired opposition riots in several towns. Their answer was similar to that of the Algerian government-exclusion from the political process and containment through intimidation and force.

The Project

Regional specialists from the government, the academic community, and the private sector met in March 1996 at National Defense University to discuss political, economic, and social trends in the Arab countries of North Africa and those governments' efforts to contain troublesome Islamist critics. The specialists focused on the situation in Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt, and the role security forces play in regime preservation and policy management.

Over the short term, regional governments have been successful in containing militant Islamist factions. The "silent majority" of North Africans, however, has not been won over by the Islamists or the government and in the longer term, will increasingly question the legitimacy of regimes unable to ameliorate their countries' problems or end the civil strife. Regional specialists identify the main problems as the absence of a competitive political arena, the need for an economic environment conducive to privatization, investment, and economic growth, and the inability to meet the needs generated by demographic growth with available resources. They agree that prospects for political accommodation and peaceful change are bleak. One specialist has observed that in the last half century not a single Arab state has permitted the transfer of power to an opposition party through fair and open elections.

Power remains-and will probably remain- concentrated in the state security apparatus and its bureaucratic appendages, headed by the military, neither of which are prepared to participate in the wholesale redistribution of power. Recent developments-the November 1995 elections in Algeria and President Liamine Zeroual's promise of parliamentary elections next year, and King Hassan's announcement that he would allow greater local political autonomy-are tactical moves having only marginal impact. There are no sincere moves by any North African government to bring Islamist-or indeed any-political opponents into the mainstream. Many experts predict that support for Islamist values and institutions will strengthen, with unknown consequences.

The Islamists' Search for Electoral Justice:

the Algerian Model

Islamic radicals and the military-controlled government have been on a collision course since the government canceled the second round of elections in early 1992. The first round of elections in December 1991 had been called by then President Chadli Bendjedid as an experiment in multiparty democracy. It culminated in a clear-cut victory for the ISF. The military forced Bendjedid to resign, canceled the results of the December election, and formed a 5-man collective body to govern in

Bendjedid's place. The cancellation-provoked out of fear of a second Islamist victory-triggered escalating violence. Islamic radicals began targeting foreign workers, as well as women, intellectuals, and government bureaucrats. The government declared a State of Emergency in February 1992 enhancing the powers of the security forces and in January 1994 appointed Liamine Zeroual president. In more than four years of virtual civil war, at least 50,000 civilians, militants, and military personnel have been killed. Neither the government nor the radical Islamists has been able to attract broad support among the Algerian population or deal a knockout blow to the other.

The goal of the Algerian military is to eliminate the Islamic radicals, introduce economic reform, and use dialogue with non-violent Islamists to marginalize the FIS and other opposition parties. Zeroual was elected President in what the regime describes as a large turnout in elections held in November 1995. This enhanced the regime's legitimacy and reinforced the generals' commitment to their strategy of eradication of the insurgents. Zeroual also offered to open dialogue with some Islamists-not the FIS-but there probably will be no concessions to the Islamists to broker peace, and the violence will likely continue. The larger than anticipated turn-out in the election, the militants' inability to disrupt them, and the oppositions' failure to sway the voters has strengthened the government's hand. Experts caution, however, that the large turnout and favorable vote is less an endorsement of government policies than a sign of general public weariness with militant-government violence. While the United States has few assets in Algeria, U.S. facilities have been attacked twice by Islamic militants and American citizens are at risk from terrorist attacks. U.S. forces could be in danger while evacuating U.S. and other foreign nationals from Algeria should the conflict widen.

Haunted by Algeria

Political leaders in Cairo, Rabat, and Tunis have watched the Algerian situation deteriorate into virtual civil war. Each government has Islamist parties which are seeking entry into the political process by becoming legitimate parties, running candidates in elections, and holding government office. And, each has evolved a similar strategy to deny the Islamists legitimacy. They endeavor to be seen as supporting Islam by sponsoring non-violent, local religious institutions, most of which are on a government dole. These governments also rely on some degree of intimidation or outright repression. The measures range from social and economic ostracism to arrest, interrogation, exile, and, in Algeria, execution of suspected members of radical Islamist groups.

Egypt. President Mubarak's most serious political challenge comes from the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and most mainstream Islamist organization in the Middle East. Brotherhood members have won control of many of Egypt's professional and trade associations and held seats in Parliament by running on legal parties' tickets. In order to protect its property and standing in Egypt, the increasingly popular organization has not openly challenged government restrictions on its activities.

The Brotherhood's threat to Mubarak is long-term. Smaller, violent groups pose the greatest danger to Egypt's immediate security. The Gamaat al-Islamiya and groups falling under the Islamic Jihad umbrella have been responsible for most terrorism in Egypt, from Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981 to recent attacks on foreign tourists. For all the publicity their operations have garnered, however, the militant Islamist factions have not won the hearts or minds of the Egyptian people, who resent the danger and loss of economic well-being caused by the violence.

Mubarak uses several methods to deal with his Islamist critics and opponents. He allows traditional Islamic clerics and scholars a wide role in interpreting Egyptian law and restricting press, media, the arts, academic scholarship, and even personal relationships. Cairo is also belatedly trying to establish social

welfare programs to rival the Brotherhood's humanitarian activities. Cairo's efforts this summer to reassert a leadership role among the Arab states following the election of a right-wing government in Israel are also intended to boost the regime's Islamic legitimacy. In June, Cairo hosted the first Pan-Arab summit since 1990 to try to create a common Arab strategy to deal with the Israeli government's opposition to continuing the peace process.

However, Mubarak also regards the Brotherhood as being in league with radical Islamists and shows no interest in opening the political system to even non-violent members of the Brotherhood or in tolerating the adoption of more fundamentalist Islamic practices or sympathizers, especially in the military services. Cairo has banned political parties based on religion, conducted security sweeps before elections, changed elective municipal offices to appointive ones, and uses military rather than civilian courts to try suspects. Many Brotherhood politicians were arrested before last fall's election, including Sayf al-Banna, son of the organization's founder and a prominent leader in the movement. This happened despite the Brotherhood's acceptance of government restrictions on its political activities.

Morocco. Morocco's King Hassan relies on a unique factor to bolster his claims to political legitimacy and contain Islamist critics: his status as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and Commander of the Faithful. The King is seen at home as a strong leader. Radical Islam does not yet pose a serious threat to his rule, but poor economic growth, bleak job prospects, high unemployment, and a high birth rate could provide a receptive climate for the growth of radical Islamist movements. Added to this volatile mix is the King's apparent ill health and a son (and successor) perceived by many Moroccans as weak. Morocco could become vulnerable to an Islamist challenge from either its non-violent Islamist party-the Justice and Charity group-or the more extremist Islamic Youth Movement.

Tunisia. Tunisia's economic growth, high levels of education, and improved living standards coupled with coercive security measures against real and suspected Islamists have kept Islamist politics quiescent. To the Tunisian leadership, the chronic unrest in Algeria only shows the folly of allowing elections. Many Tunisians are reluctant to support a cause which seems to threaten their well-being. The principal Islamist opposition movement, An-Nahda, has been silenced at home and the activities of its exiled leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, curtailed.

Recommendations

The United States and West European governments should encourage economic liberalization and foreign investment. Corruption, overpopulation, unemployment, and stagnant economies are not IslamCare creating the conditions which threaten regional stability. Investments need to be visible and concentrated in local communities where they will do the most good. Europeans have more economic and political leverage to bring to bear than does the United States. The United States should develop political strategies in cooperation with France, Spain, and Italy, and investment plans in concert with the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

Economic growth is the key but not the whole answer. Rather than emphasizing human rights and insisting on democratic processes in countries not ready to adopt or interested in adopting western political models, the United States should encourage governments to adhere to their own religious and constitutional value systems. Encouragement should be given to political liberalization and the inclusion of political groupings, including Islamists willing to work constructively within the system. Meaningful participation similar to the controlled political roles allowed by Jordan's King Hussein could help bolster regimes by providing a safety valve.

The United States and West European states should encourage regional economic and security cooperation. The idea is not to strengthen the security services' ability to hunt and kill dissidents but to create regional economic infrastructures based on natural and people resources.

The hardest policy challenge for the United States is to find a balance in relations with authoritarian regimes who support U.S. policy interests. The U.S. needs to convince Algiers, Cairo, Rabat, and Tunis that violence is self-perpetuating and could provide the breeding ground for more pernicious forms of political radicalism.

Origins and Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood

Founded in Cairo in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, a cleric preaching non-violent radical reform, the Brotherhood opted for violence but gained little. Its leaders were alternately patronized and imprisoned by Gamal Abd al-Nasir and Anwar Sadat as they sought to consolidate their power. The Brotherhood changed its tactics in the 1960s, beginning a quest for legitimate political status as it built up its popular and financial base. Today, the Brotherhood is one of the wealthiest organizations in Egypt and has approximately 2-3 million members. It outperforms the government in delivering social services and humanitarian aid to Cairo's poor and over the years has gained control of many of Egypt's powerful professional and trade syndicates. Its members have spread the Brotherhood's ideology of Islamic reform, an end to corrupt rulers, and the elimination of foreign influence throughout the Arab and Islamic world. Offshoots include the Algerian Hamas organization, the National Islamic Front headed by Hasan al-Turabi in Sudan, Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, and chapters in the Gulf states, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.

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